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A process for the preparation of compound fertilizer granules

The present invention relates to a process for the preparation of compound fertilizer granules by using solid granulation.

- 5 The term "compound fertilizer" is defined and used with several different meanings; it contains at least two of the plant nutrients nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium. Compound fertilizers are produced chemically or by blending. They shall be in the form of granules, pellets, prills, or crystals and shall be free-flowing.

- 10 Compound fertilizers are manufactured and frequently used because they are convenient to produce, transport, store and apply and because they fulfil local or regional nutrient requirements, especially basal nutrient needs well. In addition to containing various ratios of the primary nutrients ($N + P_2O_5 + K_2$), the compound fertilizers may contain certain secondary and micronutrients specific to the crop needs in particular agroclimatic regions.

- 15 Granulated fertilizers have several advantages over powders, particularly in decreasing the quantity of dust, improving uniformity of flow when fertilizers are applied and segregation when they are blended.

- 20 In classifying the granulation methods, the physical properties of the materials to be granulated will be used. According to the density of the materials the following three groups may be distinguished: granulation of solids, granulation of slurries or of melts and granulation of fluids simultaneously with the reaction by which the product is formed.

- 25 Basic processes for manufacturing compound fertilizers are: Steam/water granulation, Chemical granulation or complex or slurry granulation, Drop forming or prilling, Compaction granulation and Dry mixing or blending.

- 30 The principal mechanisms responsible for initial fertilizer granule formation and subsequent growth are agglomeration and accretion. The known and widely applied compound fertilizer granulation methods are well reported for example in "Fertilizer Manual", Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998, p. 434-451 and "Studies of Granulation of Compound Fertilizers Containing Urea: A Literature Review", G.C. Hicks, National Fertilizer Development Center; Bull Y-108, 15 pp., 1976.

Accretion is a process in which layer upon layer of a fluid material is applied to a solid particle causing it to grow in size; for example slurry-type granulation processes used to produce DAP, MAP, TSP, and some nitrophosphate compounds are accretion-type of granulation processes.

- 5 Agglomeration or granulation of solid particles is a classical method to granulate fertilizers, for example NPK products. In most agglomeration-type NPK formulations, 50-75% of the raw materials are fed as solid particles. The (premixed) raw materials are fed to a granulator where agglomeration is initiated. In the granulator steam and/or water or other liquid is added to provide sufficient liquid to enhance granulation. In some processes a small amount ammonia may also be added to promote granulation and improve product quality by increasing the CHR (critical relative humidity) and decreasing the acidity. The solid particles are assembled and joint into granules by a combination of mechanical interlocking and cementing.

- 15 A number of industrial scale processes to manufacture compound fertilizers are developed and applied. In the steam/water granulation process steam and/or water or scrubber liquid is added into the granulator to provide sufficient liquid phase and plasticity to cause the dry raw materials to agglomerate into the product-size granules required.

- 20 The use of urea as a N-source for fertilizers of the different types and grades has established. Solid urea with quite high biuret content (0,8-2,0 wt-%) is mainly used for direct application to the soil and weak aqueous urea solutions with low biuret (max 0,3 wt-%) are used as foliage sprays.

The use of urea has also established in the manufacture of (granular) compound fertilizers based on for example superphosphate or ammonium phosphate.

- 25 The conventional wet granulation is not a suitable method for producing formulations containing urea, particularly when potassium chloride is also present, because the product is very hygroscopic and therefore difficult and expensive to dry.

- 30 In the chemical granulation beside a great amount of solid raw materials, water, steam, scrubber liquid, and/or ammonia and acid are fed to the granulator; the granules are formed mostly by agglomeration but in some processes granule formation may occur by accretion, too.

Drop formation or prilling, compaction granulation, dry mixing or blending, etc. are also applied quite widely to produce different granular fertilizer formulations.

5 Because some water or moisture is always present in most traditional granulation processes, drying is an obligatory, difficult and expensive stage of the processes and cause the need of a separate dryer construction. To solve problems of granulation, product quality and drying different fertilizer grade-dependent processes are development.

10 A granulation process is described by Doshi, S.R. in the article "Fusion blend", Fertilizer Research vol. 30(1): p.87-97, 1991. Water (or steam) has been used to agglomerate solids either in powder, prilled or granulated form but no other liquids such as ammonia, phosphoric acid, or nitric acid are involved in the described process; still drying is essential.

15 Some water or moisture is always included in the process. The process is temperature and material moisture-related. For example, for the most agglomeration-type NPK fertilizers a liquid phase of about 300 kg/t of product is shown to be optimal.

20 Patent publication GB 1,189,398 (Sumitomo) discloses a process for producing a NK fertilizer which process comprises spraying a liquid mixture of urea, potassium chloride, gypsum and 1-10% by weight of water onto the solid material in a granulator. No drying is used. However, the amount of water added into the process is high enough to keep urea in dissolved state and the final product has a quite great water content of 1-2% by weight.

25 Patent publication US 4,138,750 (TVA) discloses a process for the production of fertilizers from phosphoric acid, sulfuric acid, anhydrous ammonia and urea where a specially designed pipe-cross reactor is used to produce a homogenous melt or slurry of low moisture content from phosphoric acid, sulfuric acid and anhydrous ammonia. The pipe-cross reactor eliminates the need for a preneutralizer and in addition, because of the low melt or slurry moisture content, the dryer is eliminated. The neutralization reaction heat is drying the material in the pipe-cross reactor.

30 Because of the water/moisture content of the raw materials and products, process and product quality problems, like increased hygroscopicity and plasticity, will often occur when fertilizers are granulated by using steam/water and chemical granulation processes; particularly when, for example SSP, TSP and/or urea is present in the product. The hygroscopicity and plasticity complicate drying,

screening and crushing operations, and furthermore, the storage properties of those compound fertilizers are often inferior to those of fertilizers that do not contain these substances.

5 The present invention is developed to solve the granulation, product quality, and storage etc. problems in manufacturing of compound fertilizers. The present invention relates to a process for the preparation of compound fertilizers such as NPK, NK etc., where solid raw materials are mixed in a mixer and fed to a granulator, where hot air is also fed. The raw materials are granulated without the aid of water or any other liquid such as ammonia, phosphoric acid or sulfuric acid.

10 Thus, the granulation is a true solid granulation process. Because water or any other liquid is not added, there is no need for drying the granulated product. Further more the physical quality of the product is good, too.

Particularly, the process of the present invention has great advantages to the known granulation methods which require higher temperatures at the drying phase.

15 Particularly, controlling of the humidity and drying temperature is important and difficult; the high temperature may cause melting of the granulated material and it will stick to the interior walls and flights of the dryer near the discharge end. The optimal values for humidity and temperature vary greatly from product to product.

Thus, the present invention provides a process for the preparation of compound fertilizer granules containing at least two of the plant nutrients nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium, said process comprising the steps of:

20 providing a solid feed material comprising at least one solid fertilizer raw material and optionally recycle material,

feeding the feed material or a part thereof into a melter for melting a desired portion thereof and keeping said portion in molten state,

25 feeding the molten or partly molten material and optionally other desired solid raw materials to a granulator to obtain a granulated product, and

cooling and optionally screening the granulated product to obtain dry compound fertilizer granules having a desired size distribution,

30 provided that no water or aqueous liquid is introduced into the process.

The melting of the feed material or a part thereof in the melter can be effected by introducing hot air into the melter.

According to a preferred embodiment of the invention the process is carried out continuously, and the molten portion of the feed material is kept constant during the

process by controlling the flow rate of the feed material and the temperature of the hot air introduced into the melter. The optimal proportion of the molten feed material is dependent on the grade of the fertilizer wanted and the raw materials used. For example, if urea is used as a raw material the optimal proportion of the molten urea is about 10-25 wt-%, preferably about 12-20 wt-%, depending on the grade.

When melting is carried out by the aid of hot air a suitable temperature of the hot air introduced into the melter is between 200 and 550 °C. At the melter outlet the hot air has a temperature of about 90 °C to 120 °C.

10 Suitably the temperature of the molten or partly molten feed material leaving the melter is between 70 °C and 110 °C.

Typical solid fertilizer raw materials which can be used in the present invention are e.g. urea, diammonium phosphate (DAP), K_2SO_4 (SOP), monoammonium phosphate (MAP), phosphate rock, potassium chloride (MOP i.e. KCl), single superphosphate (SSP), triple superphosphate (TSP), ammonium sulfate (AS) and ammonium chloride (AC).

Preferably the fertilizer raw materials comprise urea, especially urea prills, and at least one other fertilizer raw material.

20 Additionally magnesium sulfate and/or one or several trace elements i.e. micro-nutrients can be added.

Furthermore bentonite, calcite, calcium oxide, calcium sulfate (anhydrous or semihydrate), dolomite and/or sand and/or any other conventionally used fuller can be added.

25 According to the present invention all solid raw materials (solid fertilizer raw materials and optionally recycle material, micro nutrients and fillers) can be introduced into the melter. However, it is also possible to introduce a part of the solid raw materials into the melter and the remaining solid raw materials into the granulator.

30 In a preferred embodiment the process of the invention comprise the step of screening the granulated product to obtain dry compound fertilizer granules having a size of 2 to 5 mm.

The undersize material (< 2 mm) and the oversize material (> 5 mm) obtained in the screening can be recirculated as said recycle material. Optionally the oversize material can be milled after the screening before being recirculated.

5 The melter and granulator can be separate units but the melter and granulator can also be part of the same equipment.

This invention has advantages over the traditional granulation methods of the prior art technology because the raw materials are granulated without the aid of any water or any other liquid such as ammonia, phosphoric acid or sulfuric acid. Because water or any other liquid is not added, there is no need for drying of the product.

10 This makes the granulation operation more simple and investment costs less expensive because no separate equipment for drying is needed.

The final product will have a low water content (0.2-0.6 wt-%) originating from the raw materials. No supplementary drying is required because of the water evaporation generated by the release of the crystallization heat of the urea. The water content of the products produced by traditional methods is normally about 1-2 wt-% causing already mentioned caking and applying problems.

The invention is illustrated in and by the following examples.

Example 1

Bench scale process for solid granulation.

20 Formulas (kg/t)

Raw material	GRADE		
	15-15-15 DAP+SSP	15-15-15 MAP+Sand	17-17-17 MAP+NH ₄ Cl
Urea	249	255	204
MAP(Lithuania 11-50)	-	300	340
DAP(Pernis 17-45)	210	-	-
SSP(Lithuania 19%)	287	-	-
NH ₄ Cl (N 26%)	-	-	153
KCl (K ₂ O 60%)	250	250	284
Sand	-	175	-

The mixture of the solid raw materials was fed to the bench scale granulator. Urea was added as prills. The melting of the mixture happened with hot air at the beginning of the granulator. Granulation was carried out at the granulator and partly at the cooler.

- 5 The process conditions and results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

	GRADE		
	15-15-15 DAP+SSP	15-15-15 MAP+Sand	17-17-17 MAP+NH ₄ Cl
Process conditions:			
Feed + recycle kg/h	8.3	10.1	11.9
Recycle ratio	0.2	0.2	0.2
Air heater			
- temperature °C	336	316	322
- pressure bar	1.8	1.8	1.8
Temperature of product			
granulator outlet °C	97	92	97
cooler outlet	30	32	35
Granulation	Good	Very good	Good
Product properties:			
H ₂ O (KF) %	0.25	0.15	0.28
N %	15.2	16.1	18.2
P ₂ O ₅ total %	15.9	15.0	17.1
K ₂ O %	15.8	16.7	18.5
Granule strength N			
	52	40	50
Abrasion %			
	0	0.2	0.7
Shattering %			
	37	32	45
CRH %			
	34	35	43
Moisture absorption 80% RH			
2 h %	2.8	2.7	3.2
4 h %	5.7	5.5	6.2
6 h %	8.8	8.3	9.1

The grade 15-15-15 granulated better when it contained MAP + sand than DAP + SSP.

- 5 The grade 17-17-17 containing ammonium chloride granulated good, too. Ammonium chloride reacted partly with urea and formed urea · NH₄Cl. Nutrient content of each product was good. Physical properties of the products were good; the products were very dry.

Example 2

Bench scale process for solid granulation

10	GRADE	NK 16-0-31	
		2A	2B
	Formula	16-0-31	16-0-31
		Filler	Filler CaSO ₄
		bentonite	hemihydrate
		kg/t	kg/t
15	Urea (prills)	348	348
	KCl (white)	517	517
	Bentonite	125	-
	CaSO ₄ ·0.5H ₂ O	-	125
	(as dry matter)		

- 20 The mixture of solid raw materials was fed with the recycle to the bench scale granulator. Melting happened with hot air at the beginning of the granulator. Granulation has been carried out at the granulator and partly at the cooler.

The products were coated with Esso coating oil 2 kg/t + talc 3 kg/t.

- 25 Very good or good granulation was obtained with a good product quality. However, the great humidity of air during the process caused some immediate increase of the water content of the final product.

The process conditions and results of the product tests are shown in Table 2.

Table 2
GRADE

			NK 16-0-31	
			2A	2B
			16-0-31	16-0-31
			Filler	Filler CaSO ₄
			bentonite	hemihydrate
5	Feed + recycle kg/h		9.0	9.0
	Recycle ratio		0.7	0.4
	Air heater			
10	- temperature	°C	294	238
	- pressure	bar	1.6	1.6
	Temperature of fert °C			
	- granulator outlet		104	88
	- cooler outlet		28	27
15	Granulation		Very good	Good
	Product properties			
	Chemical analyses			
	Water (KF)	%	0.77	0.78
	Urea - N	%	16.6	16.8
20	N	%	16.6	16.8
	K ₂ O	%	31.8	30.9
	S	%	0.51	3.0
	pH		7.3	5.6
	Physical properties			
25	Granule strenght	N	27	41
	Abrasion	%	1.3	1.1
	Volume weight	kg/l	0.77	0.80
	Flowability	kg/min	4.83	4.80
	Shattering	%	52	45
30	CRH	%	40	38
	Moisture absorption			
	80% RH			
	2 h	%	2.9	2.7
	4 h	%	5.0	4.5
35	6 h	%	7.0	6.8

Example 3

Bench scale process for solid granulation

5	GRADE	Rice fertilizer
		18-12-6+1.5MgO
		kg/t
	Urea (prills)	172
	KCl (white)	100
	Kovdor phosphate	155
10	DAP (Pernis) 17-45	143
	AS (Leuna)	366
	MgSO ₄	53

- The mixture of solid raw materials was fed with the recycle to the bench scale granulator. Melting happened with hot air at the beginning of the granulator.
- 15 Granulation has been carried out at the granulator and partly at the cooler.

The products were coated with Esso coating oil 2 kg/t + talc 3 kg/t.

Very good granulation was obtained with a good product quality. The process conditions and results of product tests are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

GRADE		18-12-6+1.5MgO
	Feed + recycle kg/h	9.0
	Recycle ratio	0.6
5	Air heater	
	- temperature °C	233
	- pressure bar	1.6
	Temperature of fert °C	
	- granulator outlet	98
10	- cooler outlet	28
	Granulation	Good
Product properties		
Chemical analyses		
	Water (KF) %	0.36
15	Urea - N %	8.5
	NH ₄ - N %	9.7
	N %	18.2
	P ₂ O ₅ - Total %	11.3
	P ₂ O ₅ - NAC %	6.0 (53%)
20	P ₂ O ₅ - WS %	5.5 (49%)
	K ₂ O %	8.4
	Mg %	1.3
	S %	10.8
	pH	5.8
25	Physical properties	
	Granule strenght N	41
	Abrasion %	0.6
	Volume weight kg/l	0.84
	Flowability kg/min	4.88
30	Shattering %	59
	CRH %	40
Moisture absorption		
80% RH		
	2 h %	3.3
35	4 h %	5.2
	6 h	

Claims

1. A process for the preparation of compound fertilizer granules containing at least two of the plant nutrients nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium, said process comprising the steps of:
 - 5 providing a solid feed material comprising at least one solid fertilizer raw material and optionally recycle material,
feeding the feed material or a part thereof into a melter for melting a desired portion thereof and keeping said portion in molten state,
feeding the molten or partly molten material and optionally other desired solid raw
10 materials to a granulator to obtain a granulated product, and
cooling and optionally screening the granulated product to obtain dry compound fertilizer granules having a desired size distribution,
provided that no water or aqueous liquid is introduced into the process.
 2. A process according to claim 1, wherein the process is carried out
15 continuously, and the molten portion of the feed material is kept constant during the process by controlling the flow rate of the feed material and the temperature of the melter.
 3. A process according to claim 1 or 2, wherein the temperature of the molten or partly molten feed material is between 70 °C and 110 °C.
 - 20 4. A process according to any of claims 1-3, wherein the melting is effected by introducing hot air into said melter.
 5. A process according to claim 4, wherein the temperature of the hot air introduced into the melter is between 200 °C and 550 °C.
 6. A process according to any of claims 1-5, wherein from 10 to 25% by weight
25 of the feed material melts in the melter.
 7. A process according to any of claims 1-6, wherein the fertilizer raw materials are selected from the group consisting of urea, diammonium phosphate (DAP), K_2SO_4 (SOP), monoammonium phosphate (MAP), potassium chloride (MOP), phosphate rock, single superphosphate (SSP), triple superphosphate (TSP),
30 ammonium sulfate (AS) and ammonium chloride (AC).
 8. A process according to claim 7, wherein the fertilizer raw materials comprise urea and at least one other of said fertilizer raw materials.

9. A process according to any of claims 1-8, wherein additionally at least one material selected from the group consisting of magnesium sulfate and micronutrients is introduced into the process.

5 10. A process according to any of claims 1-9, wherein additionally at least one filler selected from the group consisting of bentonite, calcite, calcium oxide, anhydrous calcium sulfate, calcium sulfate semihydrate, dolomite, and sand, is introduced into the process.

10 11. A process according to any of claim 1, wherein the undersize material and the oversize material obtained in the screening are recirculated as said recycle material, said oversize material optionally being milled after the screening.

12. A process according to any of claims 1-11, wherein the moisture content of the dry compound fertilizer granules is below 0.6% by weight, preferably below 0.3% by weight.

Abstract

The invention relates to a process for the preparation of compound fertilizer granules containing at least two of the plant nutrients nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium, said process comprising the steps of:

providing a solid feed material comprising at least one solid fertilizer raw material and optionally recycle material,

feeding the feed material or a part thereof into a melter for melting a desired portion thereof and keeping said portion in molten state,

feeding the molten or partly molten material and optionally other desired solid raw materials to a granulator to obtain a granulated product, and

cooling and optionally screening the granulated product to obtain dry compound fertilizer granules having a desired size distribution,

provided that no water or aqueous liquid is introduced into the process.

